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SUBJECT: TURKISH YOUTH: ATTITUDES TOWARD POLITICS,
RELIGION, AND THE ECONOMY

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THIS IS THE SECOND IN A SERIES OF THREE CABLES ABOUT TURKISH
YOUTH COMPILED BY FIRST- AND SECOND-TOUR OFFICERS THROUGHOUT
MISSION TURKEY.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: As a part of ongoing efforts to reach out
to Turkey's booming youth population, we met with young
people throughout the country to gauge their opinions on
domestic politics, the economy an unemployment, and
religion. Overall, Turish youth are apolitical and
unsatisfied withthe current economic situation. Religion
elited more varied responses. The majority of yong
people, however, believe women should have the right to
choose to wear the Muslim headscarf. End summary.

CHILDREN OF THE COUP: POLITICAL APATHY PLAGUES YOUTH

¶2. (SBU) Young people we met with throughout Turkey were
relatively reluctant to discuss their own political views,
which, as became evident, may be a result of their parents'
experience with the 1980 coup, during which political
activity was punished. A fourth-year student at Marmara
University in Istanbul told us that her generation has been
taught to be apolitical and avoid involvement in such
organizations, as their parents felt that political
involvement only brought danger and possible punishment. She
said that even though her parents' generation may not have
explicitly told their children to avoid politics, it was
evident through their actions and their emphasis on
livelihood, income, and family. In contrast, a member of the
Young Leaders of Anatolia (YLA) felt that his parents'
generation had been more vocal about their opposition to
political involvement -- he told us that "families used to
advise us not to join NGOs or political parties, saying it
was dangerous to be involved."

¶3. (SBU) The Marmara University student also told us that her
peers are afraid to discuss politics at school, as they worry
it will affect their grades and what type of job they will
get. She added that her generation equates those involved in
politics with corruption and abuse of office for personal
gain.

¶4. (SBU) Although we found that most young Turks are not
involved in politics, it is worth noting that all of the
major political parties have youth branches throughout the
country. Membership numbers are not published. The ruling

Justice and Development Party's (AKP) group is by far the largest, but we believe membership numbers for all of the parties are small.

MIXED FEELINGS ABOUT THE AKP

15. (SBU) Like the population as a whole, Turkish youth are divided on their views toward the ruling AKP, with opinions appearing to fall along socioeconomic lines. Ibrahim Ozdemir, a middle-class 30-year old who runs his family's hotel in Pamukkale (a tourist destination in Southwestern Anatolia), told us that the AKP has done great things for the economy and that, in contrast to how he felt several years ago, he can "see (his) future now." He explained that the AKP's economic policies have directly affected the well-being of his family. In contrast, the English Language Fellow (ELF) posted in Ankara told us that her students (mostly upper- and upper-middle-class) were disappointed with the AKP's policies but simply grumbled in private rather than publicly protesting. The Marmara University student also expressed dissatisfaction with the AKP, saying that it changes positions often and does not keep its word.

IT'S THE ECONOMY, STUPID

16. (SBU) The economy and job prospects weigh heavily on the minds of Turkish youth. A group of 40 students from Ankara's Gazi University told us that, while the overall economic situation in Turkey appears to have improved, their families are not benefiting. In a roundtable of nine university students from five different universities in Ankara, all nine students agreed that the economic situation is worsening,

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with the cost of living ever increasing and the value of their wages decreasing.

17. (SBU) With unemployment rates for university graduates ages 20 to 24 hovering around 39 percent, all nine roundtable participants expressed concern about finding a job upon graduation. The students said that nepotism is an issue, as is underemployment. Dilek Ozgun, a 27-year-old working at a foreign mission in Ankara, told us that she was considered lucky among her peers, as she was only unemployed for one year after graduating from Bilkent University. She told us that many of the friends she graduated with in 2001 are still looking for jobs, and those who have jobs are underemployed, often working as cashiers and waiters.

YOUTH WEIGH IN ON THE HEADSCARF DEBATE

18. (SBU) Of all the topics we discussed with youth throughout Turkey, religion elicited the most varied responses. A woman's right to wear the Muslim headscarf is a particularly polarizing issue in Turkey today, dividing the country into fiercely antagonistic camps on the issue. (Note: regulations currently prohibit women from wearing Islamic-style headscarves in government offices, state-run institutions, and universities. End note.) The Gazi University students universally supported the right of women to wear headscarves, saying it is undemocratic to not allow students to wear them. Both the Gazi students and some of the roundtable students from Ankara universities pointed out a double-standard in the dress code at universities, with women being allowed to wear miniskirts, but not headscarves.

19. (SBU) Many young people noted the fine line between a woman's right to wear a headscarf and women being forced to wear them. Ibrahim Ozdemir told us that his 48-year-old mother had just recently started wearing a headscarf, but

that it was her own choice and that he felt she should have the right to do so. Several of the students in the Ankara roundtable said the headscarf was a symbol of radical Islam and male dominance. Many feared that, should the rule about headscarves be relaxed, women in remote areas would be forced to wear them. The Ankara-based ELF told us that her more liberal students are upset about the increase in the number of women wearing headscarves since the AKP took power in 2002. The ELF in Kayseri noted that her students describe the headscarf as a political tool.

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

10. (SBU) While Turkish youth are as varied as the country itself, several key points emerged from our conversations. Opinions on religion appear to vary regionally, with city-dwelling young people less observant than their rural peers, while political apathy and unhappiness with the economic situation cut across regional boundaries. Youth unemployment is clearly a major issue. It remains to be seen if dissatisfaction about joblessness will translate into increased political activism on the part of Turkey's youth.

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